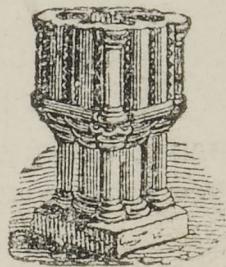


# Margaret Fletcher.



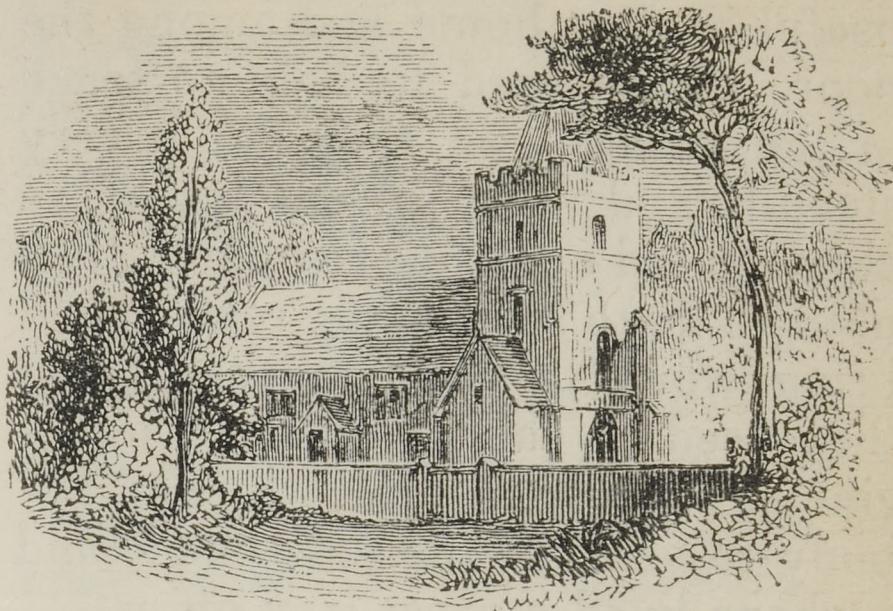
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## Margaret Fletcher.

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MRS. SOMERVILLE, the clergyman's wife at Upton, had a large family, and very few servants, so that her time was very much taken up ; but she contrived to shew much kindness to the poor people of the parish, and to teach in the school. She did

this by bringing up her girls to be useful both at home and among the poor. They used to help to teach in the school, and they did it very steadily and well. When any of the children did not come regularly, they used to go to inquire the reason, and bring word to their mother ; and they used to carry broth and medicine to the sick people, who had nobody to send to the parsonage, and perhaps lived a great way off.

It was a large parish, and there were, of course, a great many children in it ; but they did not all come to the school, not even on Sunday.

Young as you are, you may know all the excuses that are made about not coming to school. One child had no good shoes. That might be a fair excuse, if he had not contrived to run about on the wet marsh before their father's cottage for hours together in his old ones. Another found it too far to come ; and yet she could go with her mother to the market, or

the fair, if it rained ever so hard. Another did not like to have her hair cut close; as if her curl-papers and plaited hair were worth more than the good and useful things she would have learned at school! A great many girls were kept at home to mind the younger ones. This must sometimes be, when the mother is obliged to go out to work, and has many little children; but such mothers might contrive to send their girls to the Sunday-school at least, oftener than they do.

Margaret Fletcher was one of these girls. She might usually be seen in fine weather in the Long Lane, which had many cottages in it. She might be seen with one great heavy baby in her arms, and another, not much bigger, hanging upon her, or toddling after her. Sometimes she had to put the baby down in a hurry to call Jack out of the road, because the baker's cart was coming very fast down the narrow lane. Then she

turned round, perhaps, and saw the baby screaming, because a great sow was coming up and grunting at her ; or little Mary had scrambled to the top of the gate, and seemed in great danger of pitching down into Farmer Evans's wheat. In the evening she had enough to do to give them their suppers, and get them all off to bed, when her mother came in from reaping, or other work. And if it was very hot, poor Margaret's toil was not over ; for they would tumble out of bed and down stairs, or lie in bed crying. Their mother said she had no time to keep them in order. Poor Margaret looked tired and worn, and had scarcely spirit enough to keep them out of mischief.

Mrs. Somerville sometimes noticed Margaret at church, when her mother was not there. She never was kept away by bad weather, and that seemed a good sign. But when she was there she did not at all attend to what was going on ; and if she

stood up, she looked about her ; and when she ought to have been kneeling, she was sitting at her ease. She seemed to think church was a place of rest for the body, and nothing else.

Mrs. Somerville stopped her one Sunday, and said, " My little girl, you do not seem to know how to behave at church. Have you no Prayer-book ? "

" No, ma'am."

" But your mother has ? "

" Please, ma'am, I can't read."

" But you know what we come to church for ? "

Margaret did not answer directly. She was naturally shy ; and if a gentleman or lady spoke to her, it was a great chance whether she answered, or, at least, whether they heard what she said. Mrs. Somerville saw it was not rudeness, but shyness ; so she said, " Don't be afraid to tell me ; and then I will tell you something for your good, Margaret. You

are Margaret Fletcher, I think ; you have all that little brood of brothers and sisters to take care of."

Then Margaret smiled ; and when Mrs. Somerville asked her the question again, " What do we go to church for ?" she said, " I believe—I think, ma'am, them as can read go to read their Prayer-book."

Mrs. Somerville could not then stay to explain to Margaret, that every body, whether they can read or not, can join in some of the prayers ; or tell her all the things children are taught at school, but which it was plain poor Margaret had never learned. She said, " I will come to see you some day this week, and tell you some things about church. You must go home to your mother, I suppose ; and I must go to my school."

Margaret stopped one moment at the school-door, and saw the little Miss Somervilles putting their classes of children in order. Her first

thought was—"It must be very pleasant to have children kept quiet;" and the next was, "I wonder what they all learn."

She thought a good deal about Mrs. Somerville's visit, and what she would say; and wondered whether the baby would cry, or Johnny squall. She hoped they would be a little afraid of the lady; and thought the worst that was likely to happen, would be that Mary would come and stare rudely in her face.

About the middle of the week, Mrs. Somerville and one of her girls was seen coming down the lane. Mrs. Fletcher was out reaping, and Margaret's little brood were in good humour; they had got some long green rushes, which Margaret had made into plaits and little baskets for them. Have you not seen such; or made them, if you have any deep rushy ditches near you?

Mrs. Somerville went into the cottage, and Margaret and the children

after her. Margaret was too shy to offer her a chair ; but Mrs. Somerville said,—“ Now we will all sit down. And, children, you must be very good and quiet while I talk to your sister.”

Margaret put the baby in the old wicker cradle, which had held all the babies from herself downwards ; and then she slapped little Mary’s hand, who had crept up to Miss Sophy, and was pretending to pull the sprigs on her frock. Mrs. Somerville told her not to scold Mary, as she was not used to strangers, and did not know she was doing any thing rude ; and Miss Sophy said, “ If you will be good and quiet, I will let you look at my frock, and see if the flowers on it are like any that grow in the lane.” So Miss Sophy, who often took care of her own little brothers and sisters, amused the children, and kept them quiet, while her mother talked to Margaret.

She found she had gone to school

some years before, but had nearly forgotten all she had learned. She could say the Lord's Prayer, and the prayer beginning, "Lighten our darkness;" but she said them very ill, leaving out some words, and mistaking others. And the plain questions which Mrs. Somerville asked her about prayer, and sin, and repentance, she could not answer at all; but this might be partly through shyness.

This seemed rather sad, and Mrs. Somerville considered a little time. It was plain she could not be spared to go to school; but Mrs. Somerville said, "Can your mother spare you to come up to our house two or three times a week, when the harvest is over? You come up half-way to us once a week to shop, don't you? And you come to the squire's close by us for broth in the winter. You can come on to us, then, and one of my daughters will teach you. If you take pains, you may learn much

in that way. And you must ask your mother to let you come after church into the school, when you take your turn to come to church; and then you must listen to what is said to the younger children. You would like to learn these things?"

Margaret turned very red, and looked up for an instant at the young lady who was keeping the children quiet, and said, "If you please, ma'am, I should like to learn of Miss Sophy."

She looked ashamed at her freedom; and Miss Sophy said,—“ And I should like to teach you, Margaret. I am sure you will try to learn. I will be ready as soon as you can come.”

Mrs. Somerville said, — “ Ask your mother about it. She must be too much tired after her day's work to come and speak to me; but I shall see her, perhaps, after church, before long.”

Mrs. Fletcher was really willing

her girl should learn something, and told her she might bring the children into the harvest-field to her while she went to the parsonage. And when reaping and gleaning were over, she sent her regularly three times a week. But it was hard work not only for Margaret, but for Miss Sophy. It was so difficult to make Margaret say her prayers right, and so difficult to get her to remember things from one day to another. But she did get on a little ; and Mrs. Somerville put Miss Sophy in a way of making things plain to Margaret's understanding. Margaret liked coming to the parsonage, where she was kindly treated ; and she got to look more lively and happy, and to be very fond of Miss Sophy, who was always patient and kind.

By the next summer she could read the Psalms, and the Gospels, and most of the Epistles, and learn the collect, with the help of a neighbour's girl, who told her the hard

words. She had a Prayer-book given her by Miss Sophy, and could join in the service, and take pleasure in it.

However, this life could not last long. Her parents were poor, and had a large family. Her mother grew sickly, and the doctor said she must give up out-of-doors' work. She said to Margaret, "If I must stay at home with the children, I shall not want to keep you. I must see and get you a place, that you may do something for yourself. I will ask Mrs. Foster, the carrier, to inquire at Highbridge for you."

Margaret hardly knew what to think about it. She thought she should like, as she said, "to go and see the world;" but she was afraid of going among strangers, and she grieved to think of leaving Miss Sophy. She wished to speak to Mrs. Somerville about it; but her friends at the parsonage were not at home. They were gone to see Mr. Somer-

ville's father, who was very ill, and were not to come back immediately. Margaret thought she might not like every place that Mrs. Foster might recommend. She was a noisy, rough-mannered woman, and was said to be too fond of drink. So Margaret did not feel easy, when Mrs. Foster pulled up her pony-cart at the cottage-door the evening of the next market-day, and called "Mrs. Fletcher" in a very loud voice. Margaret stayed within ; but she heard Mrs. Foster tell her mother that she had got a fine place for Margaret. "They want a girl to do rough work at the Black Dog, and help to draw the beer. They do not give any wages the first year or two ; but Mrs. Green gives the girls her old things, enough to clothe them, and on market-days they get odd pence from the people who stop there, and enough to eat too, which is more than you have had since you were born, Peggy."

"True enough, worse luck," an-

swered her mother. "But a public-house! Somehow I don't like it. What will Mrs. Somerville say?"

"Just ask Mrs. Somerville if she can get her any place instead; and whether she would have the girl stay at home to be starved. Don't look so downcast, my girl; a public-house is not so bad as you fancy. Mrs. Green is an old friend of mine, and will use you well, I am sure. And when you can get any thing better, you can but leave. So make up your minds which way you please; but you must go, if you do go, next week."

"Before Mrs. Somerville comes back," thought Margaret sorrowfully. She said little more. When her father came in from work he was told about it; and answered, "I leave all that to you, mother; but I wish it was not a public-house."

It was nearly a fortnight after this that Mr. Somerville and his family returned. Miss Sophy looked for Margaret at church the next day;

but she was not there, nor her mother either. The next day, as Mrs. Somerville and her girls were going about, to inquire how all the people were, they met Mrs. Fletcher herself, and asked after Margaret. They were surprised to hear of her being gone to service, and very much grieved to hear it was at a public-house. They thought her much too young to be put in the way of temptation. They asked if she was allowed to go to church. Mrs. Fletcher said, "I cannot rightly say about that."

"But did not you ask?"

"I can't say I gave it a thought, ma'am. Mrs. Foster, the carrier, settled it all, and took Margaret there. She brought me word last week she was very well, and in a month's time she will have leave to come and see us."

"Well," Mrs. Somerville said, "we must wait and see; but a great deal of harm may be done, I fear, in a month's time."

A few weeks after this Margaret Fletcher did appear at church, and one or two of the little ones with her as formerly. But she did not look as she used to do. She had on an old faded green silk bonnet, that had once been very smart, and a dirty pink silk handkerchief round her neck, and did not look happy or cheered when Mrs. Somerville spoke to her. She asked where she got that bonnet, which did not look very well. Mrs. Green at the Black Dog had given it her; she was to have her old clothes.

"And have you much work to do?"

"A great deal of work. We do not get to bed sometimes till two or three o'clock, and I must be up early."

"And do you go to church?"

"I have never been spared once to keep my church since I have been there."

And then the tears came into poor

Margaret's eyes. Miss Sophy walked by the side of her, and said, "But then you cannot be happy there, Margaret. And you must see and hear bad things?"

"I hear bad words and bad talk, miss—I can't say but what I do; and they laugh at me when I look frightened."

And then Margaret began to cry. Miss Sophy was ready to cry too; and as she was not old enough to advise Margaret in such a matter, she said,

"I will tell mamma about it, and she will talk to your mother. The little ones have run on. Take care of the pond: go after them now, and we will see about you."

When Miss Sophy could tell her mother, she said, "Oh, mamma, what can we do? Cannot she be got away from that bad place?"

Mrs. Somerville said, "It is her mother's duty to take her away, and I must tell her so—though I fear

I cannot easily get her another place. I have promised two or three girls already."

A few days after this Mrs. Somerville walked to the Long Lane, and found Mrs. Fletcher at home, where she now was always to be found. She heard a great deal about the Black Dog, and it was all uncomfortable enough. Very bad and idle people came there—there was quarrelling and bad language; and when these people saw Margaret look shy and frightened, they took pleasure in teasing her, by saying rude and bad things to her. She had no time to herself, no corner in which to say her prayers,—not a moment on Sundays, even, to try to keep up what she had learnt. She had told her mother she was very unhappy.

On hearing this, Mrs. Somerville said, "If you will take my advice, you will take your girl away. In time she will get hardened to these things. She will learn to be bold

and impudent, if she does not learn what is worse ; and it is very seldom that a girl gets cured of boldness and impudence. I know that if she gets no other place this winter, she will add much to your hardships. I wish I could afford to take her, or get any thing for her; but I can only give my advice."

Mrs. Fletcher was a respectable person ; she had not always cared as much for her children's souls as for their bodies, but she would not keep Margaret in a place of temptation. She said,

" My neighbours will be at me for keeping the girl at home, and farmer Brown will say it's all idleness ; but I must not mind that."

" You may tell them that it was Mr. Somerville's advice ; and you know that nobody has any right to find fault with a church-woman for following her minister's advice. Fetch Margaret away at once, and let her come up to me, and I will

give her one of my girls' old straw-bonnets, instead of that tawdry thing she is forced to wear now."

So the very next Sunday Margaret was in her old place at church, without her old silk bonnet, looking much as she used to do. She came to Miss Sophy regularly, and seemed pleased to get up her learning again.

She had many trials, however. Mrs. Foster was offended, and as she passed the cottage would stop and talk of girls who learnt at the parsonage to think themselves too good for other people. And the poor girl's shoes and stockings wore out, and her parents could not give her any new ones. She had plenty to eat and to drink at the Black Dog, but now she could not get as much as she wanted. She had no cloak to keep her warm at church, as she had not belonged to the school. Yet she tried to do what she could to earn a penny. She would go on errands, or take care of a neighbour's chil-

dren ; and sometimes she spent whole days in the fields, keeping the birds from the new-sown corn. She walked all over the rough-ploughed ground great part of the day, and when she saw the rooks settle, she had to halloo and scream till they flew away. Then she would sit down under a thick bush, and repeat her lessons to herself, till the cold and the rooks brought her to her feet again. When she came up to the parsonage in the afternoon, Miss Sophy sometimes brought out to her a bit of bread and meat : she had saved it from her own dinner, because Mrs. Somerville, not being rich, was forced to make it a rule that no food should be given away at her house except to sick people.

When she went to the town on errands, she sometimes saw the girl who had taken her place at the Black Dog,—a niece of Mrs. Foster's. She was always bustling about ; and being a lively, quick girl, had a word

and a laugh with every body. She stopped Margaret once, and told her she wondered why she came away. She herself was quite happy there. She did not mind being up late—she did not mind the noise and quarrelling; she got plenty of clothes, for her mistress was very fond of her; and she got many a penny, and even a sixpence, when she carried beer out to the people who stopped on market-day. Margaret did not say much, but went home thinking of her own hardships. But then she thought of church, and her visits to the parsonage, and that spring was coming, and she should no longer suffer from cold; she would get work, and, after all, she might hear of a place, as others had done. Margaret could feel the blessings of spring more than most people, having known so much of the trials of winter.

When she came home from the town that evening, her mother was standing at the door. She said,

"Are you tired? they want you up at the parsonage, and me along with you. Mary Scott will take the children while we go."

Margaret was ready enough to go, being not a little curious to know what it was,—and curiosity makes people forget that they are tired, as I daresay you know.

When they got to the parsonage, Mrs. Somerville sent for them into the parlour. She told Mrs. Fletcher that she found she must have a girl to help her two maids, and she had thought of Margaret.

Margaret's eyes looked brighter than they had ever looked before; and Mrs. Fletcher began to curtsey, and thank Mrs. Somerville; who then said, "But I must tell you fairly that it will not be what is called a good place. You will have much to do; and the cook, who is a good woman, but rather fretful, may sometimes be sharp with you. I cannot afford to give you wages, but I will

give you tidy clothing,—I can do nothing more. The gain to you will be going to church, and having instruction on Sundays; joining us in our family prayers, and, I trust, being kept out of the way of temptation."

Margaret thought it would be happiness enough to live in the house with her friend Miss Sophy, though she did not know how to say this. She only said, "Thank you, ma'am, thank you very much. When shall I come?"

This was settled for next week; and then inquiry was made about Margaret's clothes. One of the young ladies' old stuff frocks was to be altered for her for Sundays, and a blue cotton frock bought for afternoons; and her old frock was for her rough work in the morning. The straw-bonnet was to be cleaned; and she was to have a quite new dark shawl against Easter Sunday, and a pair of thinner shoes to wear about the house.

Now the really happy time of Margaret's life began. Though she had a great deal of work, she took pains to do it all; and if the cook was cross or scolded, she had power enough over her temper not to answer again. And when she saw girls no older than herself with new frocks, and smart bonnets, and gay-looking shawls, if she longed once or twice for such things, she took care not to give them a second thought; she knew that would bring her some way towards breaking the tenth commandment.

She felt the comfort of coming in with her fellow-servants to prayers morning and evening, and kneeling down with all the family. And on Sunday, and sometimes in the week when there was not much to do, Miss Sophy took great pains to teach her. Margaret, who did not talk much to other people, used to tell Miss Sophy how glad she was to be

there, and how she thought of the public-house, and was all over in a shiver like when she thought of the bad words she heard there.

Miss Sophy said, "I am so glad, Margaret, you think you have changed for the better. Mamma said, I should remind you to be thankful for being in a place where you can go to church and learn good things, and how to be handy in a house. And she says you should try to forget the bad things you heard, and turn your thoughts away from them. You can do that by trying to think of something good when they come into your head. Mamma says you get on very well for a beginner, and cook says you will do in time. And on Easter Sunday we have settled that you are to go home, to spend the afternoon. And look, here are two shillings, Margaret, out of my savings; I shall give them to you, to do what you like with. I suppose

you will leave them with your mother when you go to see her. Shall not you like that?"

Margaret said she should ; and her Easter Sunday was a very happy one. She stood up with the children in the Sunday-school to say the Catechism, and answered all the questions right. And it was a fine spring afternoon ; so she walked home after church with her mother to tea, and spent a happy evening with her brothers and sisters.

I believe she lived at the parsonage till she was quite a woman, and able to take the housemaid's place there.

